

PAINTING AIR

Spencer Finch

February 24–July 29, 2012

MUSEUM OF ART

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Painting Air: Spencer Finch

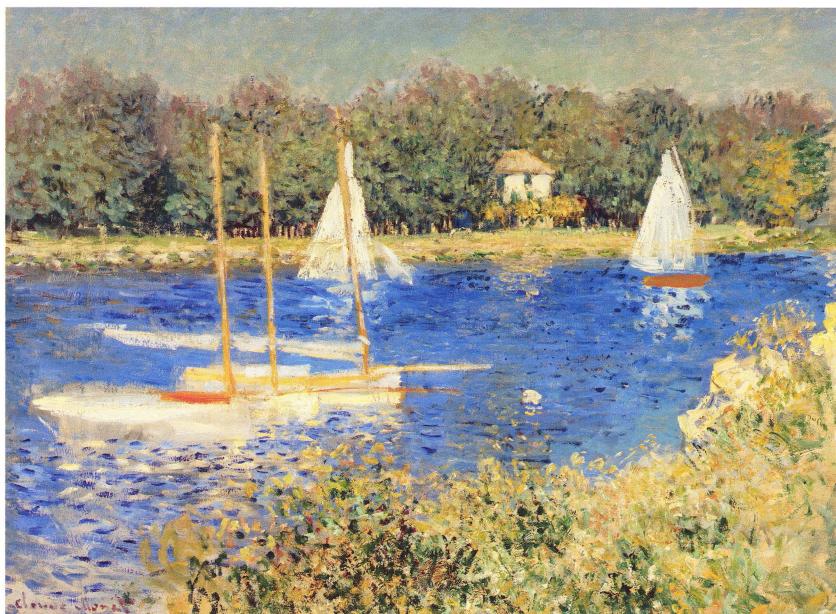
Spencer Finch, an artist known internationally for artwork that captures fleeting or intangible natural phenomena and sensory experiences, received his MFA in Sculpture from RISD in 1989. In the two decades since, Finch has created drawings, watercolors, photography, and video as well as sculpture and installations—selecting mediums and methods that seem best suited to conveying his fascination with light, color, and atmosphere. His focus of attention ranges from a speck of dust seen in a shaft of light in his studio to grand glaciers in New Zealand.

As a graduate student Finch worked in the RISD Museum's department of Painting and Sculpture with then curators Daniel Rosenfeld and Ann Slimmon Woolsey and spent many hours absorbing the art of the past and present on view in the galleries. In subsequent years Finch renewed his relationship with the collections from time to time as a visiting artist and lecturer. Last year, in her position as Interim Director, Woolsey invited Finch to create an exhibition of his own work in the new large Chace Center gallery. In a subsequent site visit and conversations with Judith Tannenbaum, Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art, Finch's interest in choosing works from the Museum's storage vaults emerged, and the project expanded to include the adjoining gallery. Like many museums, the RISD Museum

is only able to display a small percentage of its rich holdings at any given time; many objects remain inaccessible to visitors due to limited gallery space and a variety of other reasons. The precedent for inviting an artist to serve as curator and delve into storage dates back to *Raid the Icebox 1 with Andy Warhol*. Mounted at the RISD Museum in 1970, this seminal exhibition inspired similar projects nationally and internationally in more recent decades.

Painting Air starts with Monet's painting *The Basin at Argenteuil*, 1874, which Finch copied in 1988. Finch's study of this light-filled composition proved to be a turning point that set him on the trajectory he has followed to this day. One gallery is devoted to groupings of objects from the Museum's collections—including paintings, drawings, prints, decorative arts, and textiles representing a range of cultures and time periods. Their placement underscores shared aesthetic influences, unexpected connections among disparate works, and Finch's personal sensibility. The other gallery features Finch's own work. It includes a new installation inspired by his visit last summer to Monet's water garden in Giverny, France, and two- and three-dimensional works that reveal both the subtlety and complexity of Finch's analysis of light and color and how we experience the natural and manmade world.—JT

I want to paint the air . . . and that is nothing short of impossible. — Claude Monet, 1895



Claude Monet, *The Basin at Argenteuil (Le Bassin d'Argenteuil)*, 1874.
Gift of Mrs. Murray S. Danforth

Spencer Finch in Conversation with Judith Tannenbaum

November 27, 2011, at the artist's studio in the Gowanus section of Brooklyn

Judith Tannenbaum Monet's work is at the heart of your exhibition at the RISD Museum. Your artwork looks nothing like Monet's painting, but your consistent analysis of light and color, use of a serial method, and ongoing aspiration to capture constantly changing experiences in nature are rooted in Impressionism. How did Monet come to be such an important influence for you?

Spencer Finch Monet is a touchstone for me on visual, technical, and conceptual levels. What attracted me first was Monet's relationship—or how I perceived his relationship—to photography. Though I don't have any hard evidence to prove it, Monet's serial work seems to me to be against photography, against pictorial realism. When I started working in the early '90s, I felt photography was trying to claim some sort of greater truth than other forms of expression. I thought that Monet's work, especially the serial work, was about this idea of trying to capture something—a place, a moment, an impression, a light condition—and by repeatedly returning to it to get closer to its essence, while at the same time admitting the impossibility of doing so. That impossibility is interesting to me—the impossibility of representation, the impossibility of communication, the impossibility of making art to a certain degree. That's why I like the title of the RISD show, which is *Painting Air*. I don't really remember where I found it, but Monet said, "I am trying to paint air," which is of course a paradox.

JT Yes, he said, "I want to paint the air . . . and that is nothing short of impossible." The quote is from an 1895 interview in which Monet contrasts his own unattainable goals with artists who simply aim to paint a house or a boat.

SF On the other hand, Edward Hopper said that all he wanted to do was "paint sunlight on the side of a house." The art that I find most compelling involves this kind of Beckettian, absurd compulsion to do something impossible. This idea was foundational for me in the beginning—this self-aware ridiculousness, the incredible desire and need to do something while knowing it can't be done.

JT When did you first begin to make work with Monet specifically in mind?

SF When I was in graduate school at RISD, almost twenty-five years ago. I had been studying Marxist criticism and had a general awareness of Impressionism. I was thinking about how Impressionist art was used to appeal to the bourgeoisie and to control the masses, how it's really about money and not about deeper things. While talking about this with friends at RISD, Paul Ramirez Jonas dared me to copy the Monet painting *The Basin at Argenteuil* [1874; in the RISD Museum collection]. I thought it would be easy but it wasn't. I didn't have that sort of classical education; I'd never been forced to copy a painting and had taken very

few painting classes, and I guess at first I was mocking this type of traditional education, this learning from the master. But it was a great experience, the sort of thing that can only happen in grad school, in a hothouse situation where you have time to do something like that.

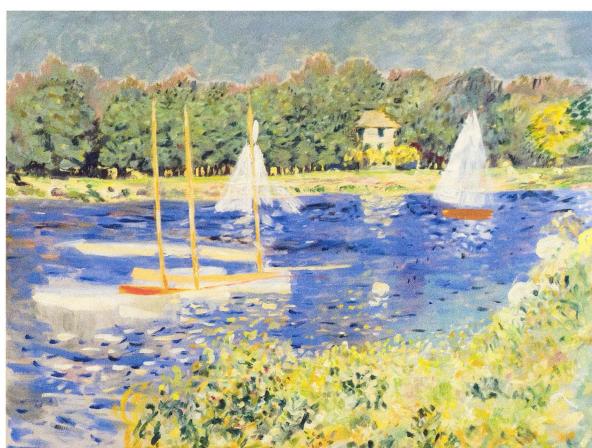
JT Did that experience change your work right away? What did you do immediately after?

SF I did two or three paintings based on the costume jewelry company Monet, which had a factory in Pawtucket at the time. I took a photograph of a big billboard off of I-95 in Pawtucket that said "Monet" and made a painting of the off ramp and the billboard. Then I did a painting of the building on lower 5th Avenue in New York where Monet's headquarters was, using the palette of Monet's Rouen Cathedral paintings. I wasn't interested in light and color very much at that time; I was interested in critiquing the social and political roles Impressionist paintings played in our culture, the idea of Monet in popular culture and in the institution of museums—and trying to do it from the inside out.

JT Were you also thinking about the stereotype of the artist as genius?

SF Let's face it, the whole project was kind of juvenile. But yes, initially, I started painting a copy of *The Basin at Argenteuil* with the expectation of presenting it elsewhere in the museum as a critique of the cult of originality and genius. But as I said, it was more difficult than I expected. I did two copies and still I wasn't close. Soon the critique seemed tired and simplistic, but I made a copy of the frame in clay and made a mold anyway. It took longer to make than the painting but was clearly not significant. Later on I fell in love with the costume jewelry idea—or maybe it was just the illusion of love—and made those pieces. So I fell in love with my victim twice. In any case, I was more interested in critiquing how Monet's works were used by society. For my MFA thesis I created a green box, based on Duchamp's *Green Box*, but made for Monet—a funny green viridian box for Claude. [Finch retrieves his version of the *Green Box* from a shelf in the studio.] I'd forgotten about this. I haven't looked at it in a long time.

Spencer Finch, Copy of Monet's *The Basin at Argenteuil*, 1988





Spencer Finch, A Green (Viridian) Box for Claude, Even, 1989

JT *Fantastic! You made this?*

SF Looking at it now, it's very embarrassing—I shouldn't let you look!

JT [discovers a plastic eye on the cover of the box] *Oh, how funny! You're playing with the famous Cézanne quote in which he says that Monet was "only an eye, but what an eye!" I see that you included research about the history of the Monet Company, and here's a museum postcard of the original painting. Was this all part of your thesis project?*

SF Yes. For the graduate show, which was held in the Museum, I rented my space to the Monet Jewelry Company for \$25 and displayed three pedestals with their latest jewelry designs, along with a display banner, the gallery guide, and postcards about the jewelry. My green box was not shown in the Museum, it was submitted as my thesis book.

JT *Let's talk about the RISD show. Painting Air is an exhibition in two parts—one part is comprised of a large new installation along with a selection of your work from the past five years, much of which deals with air and water. The other part is a selection of objects you chose from the RISD Museum collection, including the Monet painting you copied, The Basin at Argenteuil. What are your goals or motivations for the show? Are they different for each section?*

SF Yes, definitely. In the installation I'm thinking about Monet's garden as a type of laboratory or experimental environment to explore ideas about reflection and absorption, surface and depth, changing color, changing light, and changing environment. I visited Giverny for the second time in June of this year and was amazed. It's a pond that was created as a place to make paintings, so it's a pseudo-natural environment. I'm interested in exploring the relationship between this pond/laboratory and the results—the water paintings, which are incredibly rich and complex studies of optical phenomena. Then of course there is the relationship between the paint and the image, the place and the painting. I want to create an artificial environment that explores these same modes that Monet was interested in, but in a totally different context.

It will be a sort of reduction to the formal essence of what Monet was looking at—color, light, reflection, transparency—using the hanging glass panes to play the optical role of Monet's pond. The other works—watercolors and photographs on adjacent walls—all deal with the slippery nature of representation in one way or another. And the glacier pool sculpture is of course an absurdly elaborate monochrome painting of air.

JT *You're also including a piece called Bee Purple, which you first showed in 2008 and which you're adapting for this show. I'm curious about why you wanted to revisit that project and how you want this version to be different.*

SF The original *Bee Purple* was a beta version. It's named after a color called "bee purple," a combination of yellow and ultraviolet that humans can't see. When I did it first I wasn't thinking about scale, I was just thinking about trying to get the color right. This time I'm shifting the scale to reflect that of a bee, and I'm working the idea through all the way. I'm trying to trick the eye to have us see what a bee sees, which is impossible, because they see ultraviolet—things outside of our visual spectrum.

JT *What brought you to the subject of bees' sight?*

SF Weirdly, I think my obsession with Emily Dickinson led me here. Of course she wrote a lot about bees, but her perceptual scope—her ability to see and experience the world and to somehow then put her observations back out in poetic form so we could experience them—was so much wider than that of normal humans. I think that *Bee Purple* is a literal way of thinking about trying to see how others see. It's always been interesting to me to see with someone else's eyes, to see from outside myself, so this idea of actually seeing what a bee sees is fascinating to me. I wouldn't be surprised if Emily Dickinson could see bee purple. It's also related to the idea of "painting air," in that it's impossible. As Dickinson said, "The brain is wider than the sky."

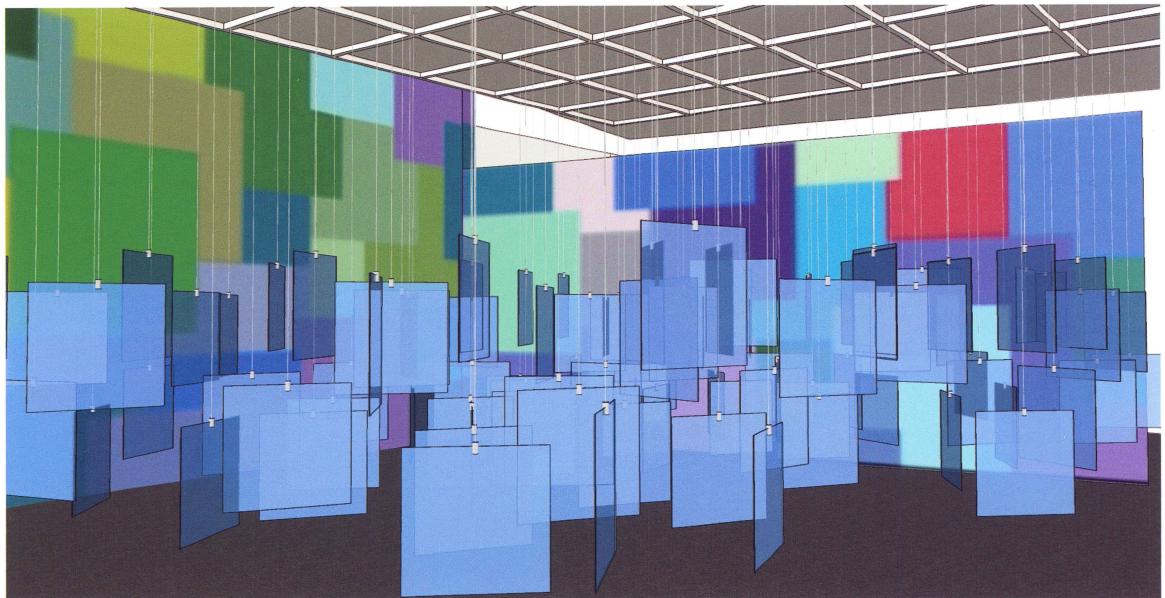
JT *Let's talk about the other part of the show, the selection from the collection part.*

SF The organizing principle for the collection part is for me to think about it as an artist rather than a curator, because I'm not a specialist. I want to bring things to view that are interesting or inspirational to me now or that would have been when I was a young artist. I'm trying not to be too clever or too ironic. There's definitely some irony there, but I hope it's sort of ha-ha irony and not snide irony. I'm also interested in the relationships among objects, which is incredibly complex and rich.

I've also been thinking about the galleries being the conscious part of the museum and



ILC Dover, manufacturer, eleven layers of material for Extravehicular Mobility Unit (textile sample), ca. 1983. Gift of ILC Industries, Inc./ILC Dover

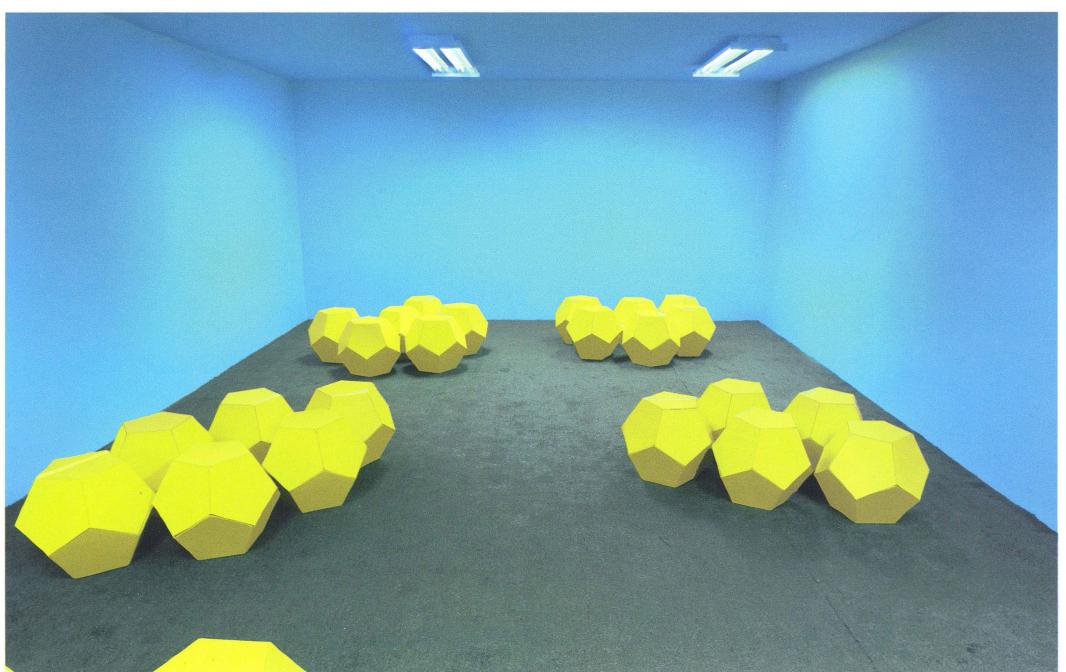


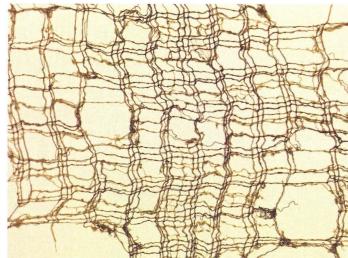
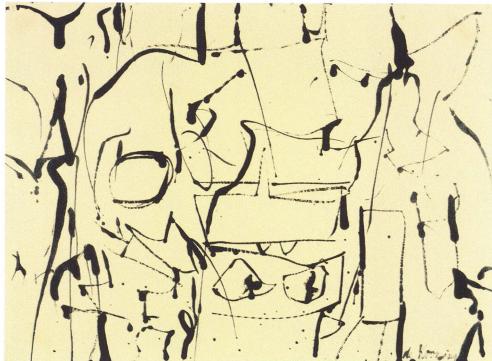
Spencer Finch, Sketch for *Painting Air* installation, 2011



Spencer Finch, Study for *Painting Air* (detail), 2012

Spencer Finch, *Bee Purple*, 2008/2012





Willem de Kooning, *Black and White Abstraction*, ca. 1950. Museum Works of Art Fund

Peruvian, Textile (head covering), Late Intermediate Period/Late Horizon, 1200-1550. Gift of the Weavers Guild of Boston

storage being the unconscious part. I like this idea of trying to have the unconscious rear its head into the consciousness of the galleries. These weird things that pop out of storage aren't as controllable as what's on view, but we rarely get to see them. They're there because it's very hard to deaccession something. It's like how it's hard to get rid of a bad memory that just sits there in your unconscious. I guess that would make the curators the super ego.

JT *How has it felt playing super ego?*

SF Going through the collection and talking with the Museum's curators has been really fun. I love seeing people who are obsessed and in love with their work, which I think these curators are. It means that they're a little bit possessive and hesitant to let me use things but at the same time they have this incredible knowledge and appreciation for their material, and you don't see that day to day. I love being on my own and making my own work, but I also love sharing ideas while looking at art. I love learning about art history and seeing new things. There are also so many surprises in the collection. Painting and sculpture I was more familiar with from my time here as a student, but all that stuff in Decorative Arts I didn't know about, and there are so many exciting prints, drawings, and photographs. Learning about Costume and Textiles has also been really fascinating.

JT *It's a great learning experience for us as well. For us the surprise is in seeing what you react to and what you don't react to—it's totally personal and unpredictable. The connections between objects you are making are equally interesting. You are pairing some things from totally different civilizations, totally different*

eras—for example, an ancient Peruvian textile [head covering, 1200-1550] juxtaposed with a de Kooning drawing [*Black and White Abstraction*, ca. 1950].

SF Yes, I don't want to do that too much or the project would become one-dimensional, but certain relationships are compelling. I don't think de Kooning was thinking about the connection between painting and textiles but there is an amazing formal similarity. What is that? Is it the collective unconscious or something?

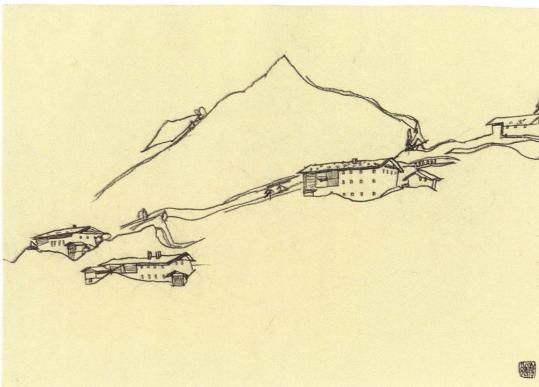
JT *I think part of the appeal for us is to see old things through new eyes and from the perspective of our own culture. Monet's paintings changed a lot for later audiences given what happened in the 1950s with Abstract Expressionism and then in the '60s with Pop art and serial imagery. You start to read earlier work in a very different way based on later developments, even though that might be totally antithetical to the artist's intention. When I was studying art history in the early 1970s, people were looking at Monet as an Abstract Expressionist, which was the farthest thing from his world. But there is something really rich, as you said, in considering these visual connections.*

SF There's something very human about it—to see that ancient textile and the de Kooning together. It's joyful. I can't explain it, but it makes me smile.

JT *Yes, it's playful. You've also made interesting pairings between drawings by Egon Schiele and John Singer Sargent. What made you put those two artists together?*

SF They're very different artists and I love both of them, so I think by putting them together I'm trying to figure out what I'm interested in. I like the idea that they're both prodigies,

Egon Schiele, *Mountain Landscape*, 1917. Anonymous gift



John Singer Sargent, *Rocky Coast near Boston*, 1921. Anonymous gift



that they both have incredible facility. The critique of Sargent is that he was so skilled but didn't push himself, that he wasted his talent on society portraits. But clearly he worked incredibly hard. He can paint like a dream, so he's seductive, but it's more form than content—he's not really telling us anything we don't know already. Schiele on the other hand is saying things. His work is a little scary and much more daring and still has this incredible skill. You can think of them both as society painters in a way, with Schiele showing a part of society that is much more edgy. Sargent for me is a bit of a guilty pleasure, whereas Schiele offers the pleasure of an artist so totally different from me. Sargent I can understand, Schiele I can't.

JT *How is Schiele so different from you?*

SF He was so radical and I don't feel I'm radical that way.

I'm much more conventional. Even though I present my work in unconventional ways, I'm interested in conventional subjects. His subject matter was unconventional. He had this intensity. I would like to be that kind of artist but I'm not and I just have to accept it. Also Schiele was an early bloomer and I think I'm a late bloomer.

JT *You know about Warhol's seminal show he created at the RISD Museum in 1970 called Raid the Icebox 1 with Andy Warhol. I wonder if you have any thoughts about that precedent?*

SF I was aware of the Warhol exhibition when I was at RISD because Dan [Rosenfeld, then curator] gave me the catalogue when I was a student. It's great, it's Warhol, but I couldn't do the same thing. He really put the Museum's unconscious out there in a major way. But with so much included, so many shoes and chairs, I think it would have been nearly impossible to look at any individual work, which—and this probably sounds reactionary—does a bit of a disservice to the individual works to serve the big idea. I also think the title should have been more 1970, like, "Let it all hang out."

JT *Yes, it did reflect his love of stuff.*

SF Yeah, I don't have a lot of stuff.

JT *This is not your first intervention at a museum. You did a project called Masterpieces without the Director in 1991 at the Metropolitan Museum together with Paul Ramirez Jonas. Can you talk about that?*

SF At that point Paul and I were both interested in the idea of critiquing the institution so we decided to do an alternative tour of the Met based on the standard audio tour by then-director Philippe de Montebello. Montebello had selected nineteen masterpieces, which he spoke about in a very authoritative way. Our idea was to democratize the narrative by interviewing people about the same works and making an alternative audio guide using their voices. We started out doing interviews in the museum but got kicked out and had to do them on the front steps. So we showed people photographic reproductions of the nineteen works and asked for their impressions, then put their comments together into an audio tour that was more varied, complex questioning, and cacophonous than the museum director's tour. For the launch we set up a table in front of the



Raid the Icebox 1 with Andy Warhol exhibition, 1970

museum and asked people to bring their Walkmen, then supplied them with cassette tapes.

JT *What kinds of things did people say?*

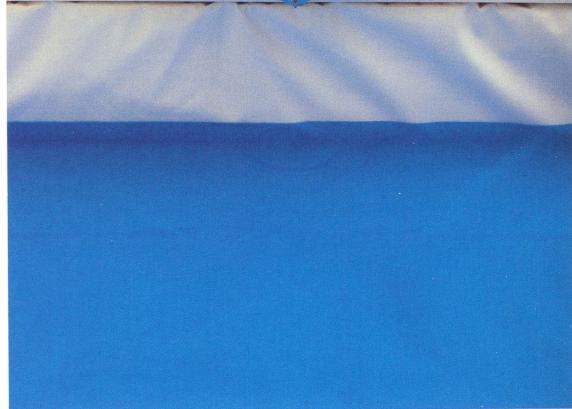
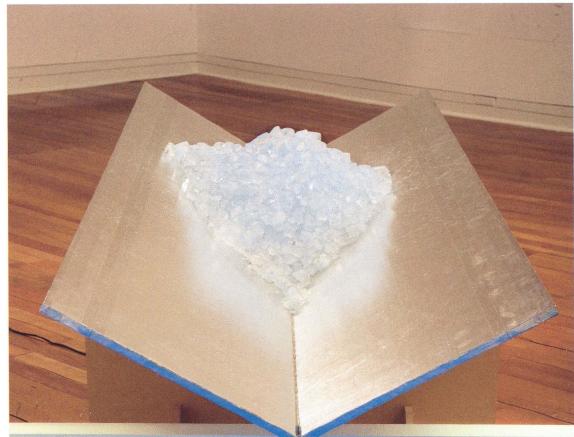
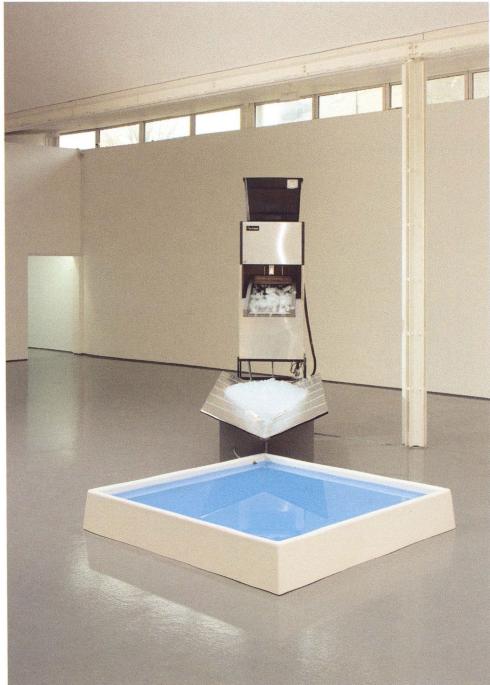
SF About the George Caleb Bingham painting [*Fur Traders Descending the Missouri*, 1845], which I find stupid, people kept asking about the animal on the boat, "Is it a cat?" "Or is it a fox?" "What is that?" And we did have some ringers—for example, we interviewed [Nation art critic] Arthur Danto, and he was fantastic. Talking about the Velázquez portrait of Juan de Pareja he paraphrased Bart Simpson, who was very popular at the time, "I am Juan de Pareja. Who the hell are you?" That was great since Philippe de Montebello would never quote Bart Simpson. Philippe de Montebello wasn't interested in whether it was a cat or a fox or whatever, he was interested in how it played out this grand narrative of the history of art. I still think Danto is a genius and de Montebello is a putz.

JT *What kind of reactions did you get?*

SF The museum was quite angry with us but they had to let us be in front of the museum because it's city property and Creative Time, the public-art organization that sponsored the project, had gotten permission. But the people who worked at the Acoustiguide desk were actually supportive. They would open up the official Acoustiguide with a key so visitors could replace de Montebello's tape with ours.

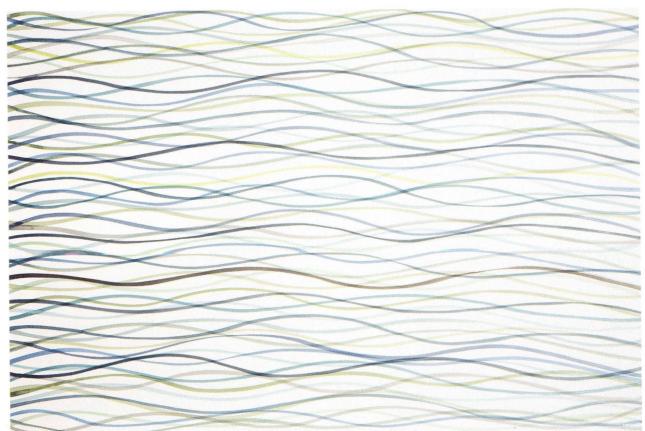
JT *Was that infiltration part of what you had intended?*

Spencer Finch, *Sky (Over Franz Joseph Glacier, April 8, 2008, 10:40am)* (installation and detail), 2008



Spencer Finch, *Fox Glacier XIII*, 2010

Spencer Finch, *Pacific Ocean, Noosa, Australia, April 1, 2008 (afternoon effect)*, 2009



SF No, that just sort of happened. But honestly, we did think we were going to take down the institution, which of course didn't happen. It's like a fly and an elephant—we realized how powerful these institutions are, and that you can't do much. But it was fun to talk with people and cathartic to realize that all sorts of people have all sorts of opinions about art. And I learned my way around the Met. I can go anywhere there without a map.

JT Are you still interested in democratizing the museum?

SF Yes, and I think that's happening to some extent. Museum education programs have made museums much more democratic and less intimidating, and that's a good thing. Think about how popular museums are now compared to twenty years ago—you can't get into MoMA on a weekend. Of course they may be popular for the wrong reasons . . .

JT What gives you greatest pleasure about museums?

SF I love going back to museums to see paintings that are special to me, whether it's the Van der Weyden painting in Philadelphia, the Holbein painting in Basel, the Zurbarán painting in Chicago, or the Reinharts at MoMA. I like the feeling that these paintings are there just for me and that I can go back and see them. I also like seeing paintings for the first time. When I went to the Pamphilj gallery in Rome this summer for the first time, I went to see the Velázquez painting of Pope Innocent X. It is mostly paintings I see that excite me, move me, and remind me of why I like being an artist—they make me want to try harder. When I was at the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego this September installing my work, I saw this fantastic Nauman piece, *Green Light Corridor* [1970]. It's such a brilliant work and it got me so excited and angry.

JT Why did it make you angry?

SF Because Nauman did such a good job. He just hit it out of the park, and you think, why bother? Of course I didn't quit because by now artmaking is pathological for me.

JT You've been teaching a course at RISD this term alongside working on the show. The course focuses on artistic influence—how artists absorb ideas from earlier artists and take them someplace new. Has your teaching overlapped with your thinking about the show?

SF Yes, you learn a lot when you teach. Influence is something I am interested in generally and it's also relevant to this exhibition, one part of which is based loosely on the influence of Monet and the other on art in the collection. We spent a lot of time at the Museum and it's been great

for the students to use this incredible resource and learn about the institution.

JT Did the students give you any ideas about how to shape your own exhibition?

SF Yes, I would bounce ideas off of them and if they had a positive reaction I took it as a vote of approval because the exhibition to some degree is intended for students.

JT You mentioned earlier that in making selections from the collection you are seeing through a young artist's eyes. What work other than Monet's appealed to you as a young artist, twenty-some years ago at RISD?

SF At that time I was working at the Museum, running a weekly video program. We had a small video room on the top floor—it was like a converted closet. The videos would loop two or three times, so I would walk around during the second and third times. I remember things like that Netherlandish painting of the man's head, which was originally attributed to Hugo Van der Goes [Bruges Master, *Portrait of a Cleric*, ca. 1490] and which I found really compelling. The Manet painting of Berthe Morisot [*Le Repos (Repose)*, ca. 1870-1871] I thought was fantastic. The Twombly painting I loved [*Untitled*, 1968]; the Matisse painting with the pumpkin I loved [*The Green Pumpkin*, 1916]; the Warhol painting *Race Riot* [1964] was really important to me. I would also always look at books in the Painting and Sculpture office, where I had to go to get the videotapes. I still have a Rothko book that Dan [Rosenfeld] gave me. I really started thinking about Rothko then.

JT Many of the works you mention are paintings, though you don't really paint—your practice is more sculptural.

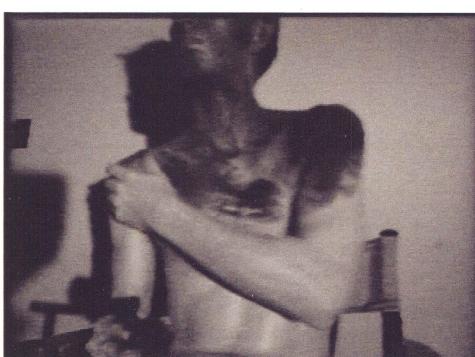
SF That's true, but I have a two-dimensional sensibility—I have a hard time with three dimensions sometimes.

JT You started at RISD in the Ceramics department and then moved to Sculpture. Did you make any sculpture at all?

SF None that I'm particularly proud of. I was doing performances on the street—that's actually what got me kicked out of the Ceramics department.

JT What other art and artists were you interested in while you were at RISD, outside of the collection?

SF I spent time in Japan as a student and I think certain visual tendencies were influenced by a Japanese aesthetic. I was very interested in Brice Marden, whose works—like the Grove paintings with encaustic panels—were the first minimalist paintings I got to know and really love. There were people like Chris Burden, who we were all obsessed with, and Vito Acconci. Vito came to speak when I was a student and was incredible. It was so enthralling to hear an artist question his work and admit that some of it's not great. His talk wasn't canned. He was trying to think freshly about things, pacing back and forth onstage. He seemed so authentic and so pure, as if he really cared about trying to make good art and not about trying to create some sort of signature style or getting rich or famous. Bruce Nauman was inspiring for that same reason. He was trying to figure things out in a



Bruce Nauman, *Flesh to White to Black to Flesh* (video still), 1967-1968. Jesse Metcalf Fund

way that was almost philosophical, working in very different ways, and that stuck with me. Serra also was interesting. Beuys was very popular at that time, but I didn't understand the whole narrative-myth thing. It seemed like bullshit to me. But I liked Richter. I was also interested in work that was more politically engaged, like Dennis Adams's and Sherrie Levine's. I was in charge of the visiting artists program for the department and I tried to get Louise Lawler to visit. I baked cookies and sent them to her, but she was too busy.

JT Did you meet her later?

SF Yes, and she remembers liking the cookies, but she didn't come visit.

JT Were there any teachers at RISD who were especially important to you?

SF Yes. Tom Lawson, Roni Horn, Ronald Jones, among others.

JT When did you begin to focus more generally on light and color as both subject and method?

SF After RISD, I moved to New York and got a job. I was working at McGraw-Hill on 53rd Street so I got an artist membership at MoMA and would go over there at lunchtime. I would wander around and look at things, including their amazing *Water Lily* mural by Monet. Until then I was really only interested in working conceptually—I didn't care too much what things looked like. I slowly began to realize that the works I liked the most were conceptual on some level but also visually compelling. This probably had to do with leaving academia and shedding that skin and going out into the real world. So I started thinking about making things that used light and color but also dealt with the philosophical issues of light and color. I came across Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Color* at the MoMA bookstore at about the same time. It gave me a way to think about color conceptually, about the relationships between language and thought and color.

It was in the early '90s when I started moving in that direction but it took a long time to feel confident in being able to make things that were interesting visually. I felt like I was smart enough to make conceptual art, but I didn't feel that I was skilled enough or knew enough about materials to make things that were strong as visual objects. It takes a

long time to learn about materials when you don't have a strong technical foundation. I remember a friend suggested, "You should try to use pastel," and I didn't even know what you could do with pastel, that you could turn it into powder and rub it into paper. In my early ceramic days I loved doing glaze test after glaze test, so I like the technical stuff but it took time to feel confident in my abilities with traditional media.

JT So you believe art has to be both visually compelling and conceptually strong to be successful?

SF I like some work that is almost totally one or totally the other, but I think the work that succeeds the most is both. I feel it has to rise out of some sort of conceptual need.

JT Once you come up with an idea, how do you figure out what form it's going to take?

SF I do tests, I write things out and draw things out in my sketchbook, I think about the specific space for the project, and I think about an idea until I feel there's a necessary relationship between the form and the idea. It can be sort of excruciating, figuring out how and in what form the idea is made present. I always worry of course that the essential link won't happen, that the idea is just going to dry up. It's the hardest part but also the most fun.

JT Have you felt that way about creating *Painting Air*?

SF Yes. I don't think I knew quite what we were getting into, did you? Both parts of the exhibition are sort of terrifying for me, but because I'm more used to putting a show together of my own work I feel more confident about that than the collection part.

JT What will make that part of the show successful for you?

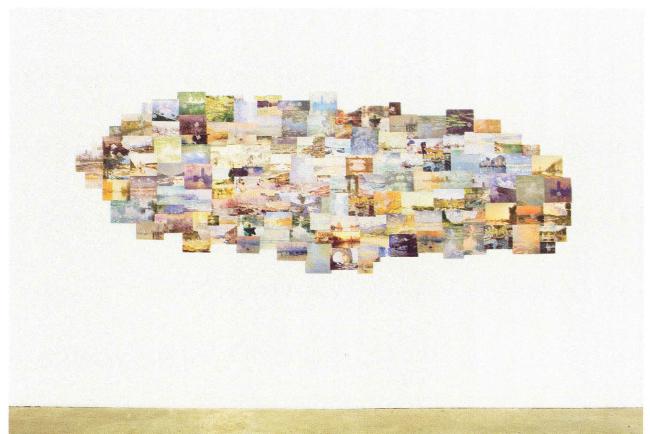
SF I guess the same thing that makes any art successful for me—if it's compelling visually and conceptually. I want to present things that are interesting to look at and think about. If no one spends any time in there, it's a failure. But if people actually do spend time there, especially students, then it will be a success. But, really, any student who doesn't spend at least five minutes with the Schieles should be expelled.



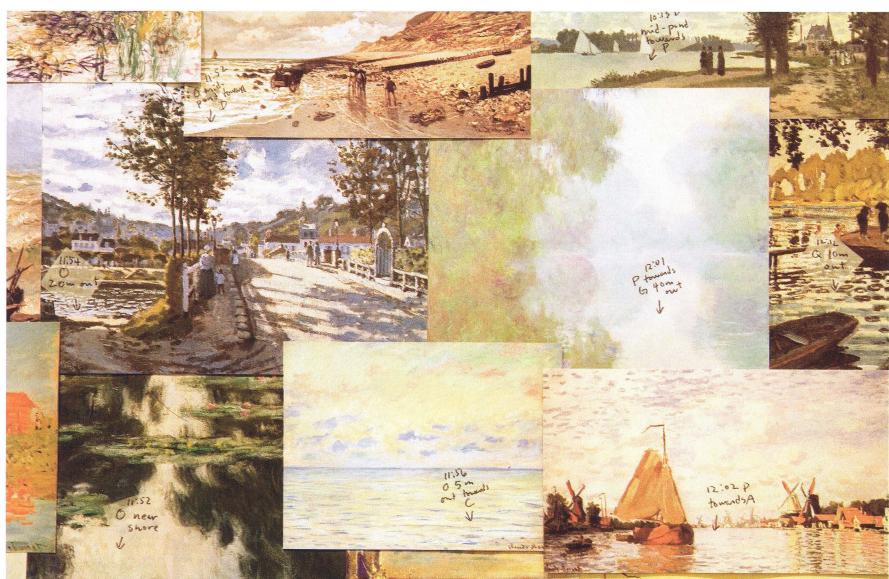
Spencer Finch, *Thank You, Fog*, 2009

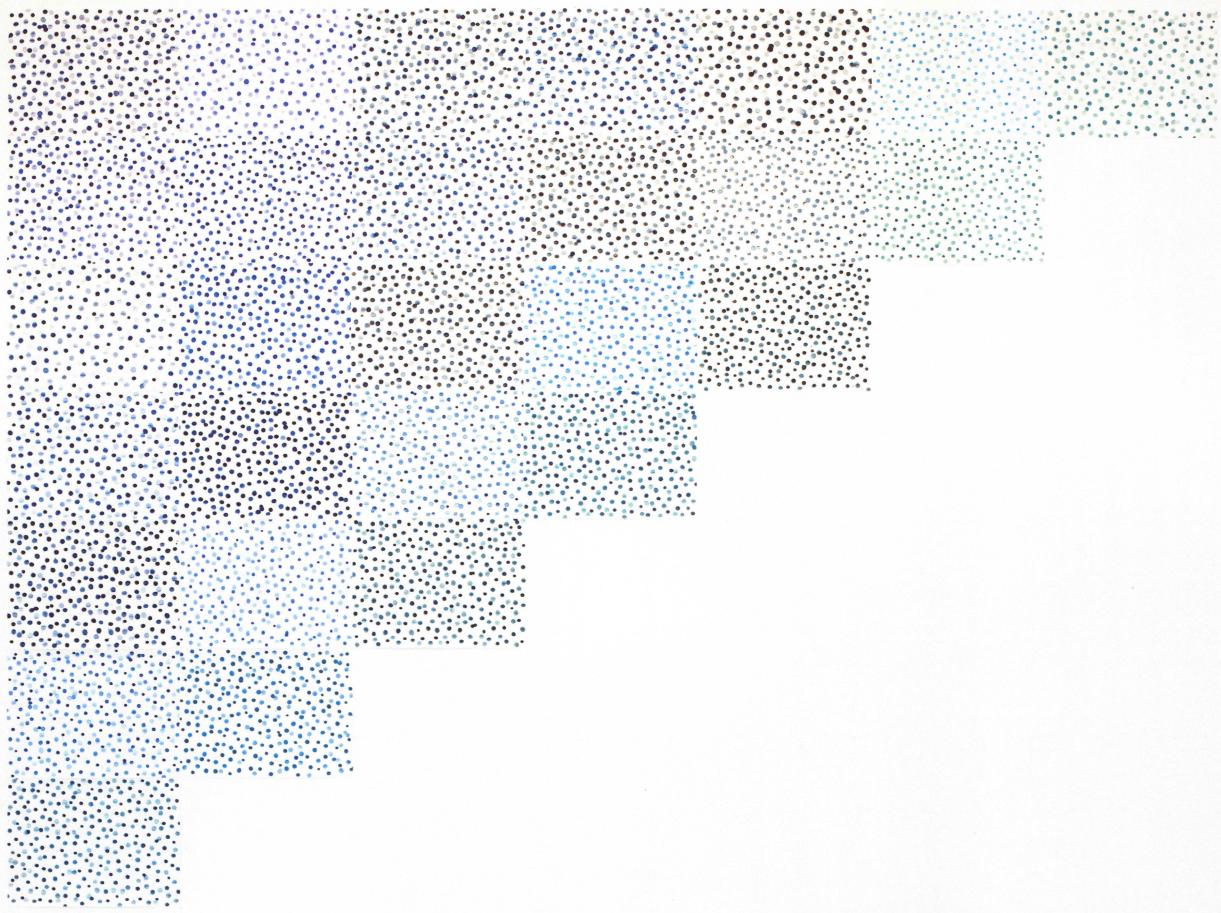


Spencer Finch, *Taxonomy of Clouds* (installation and details), 2006

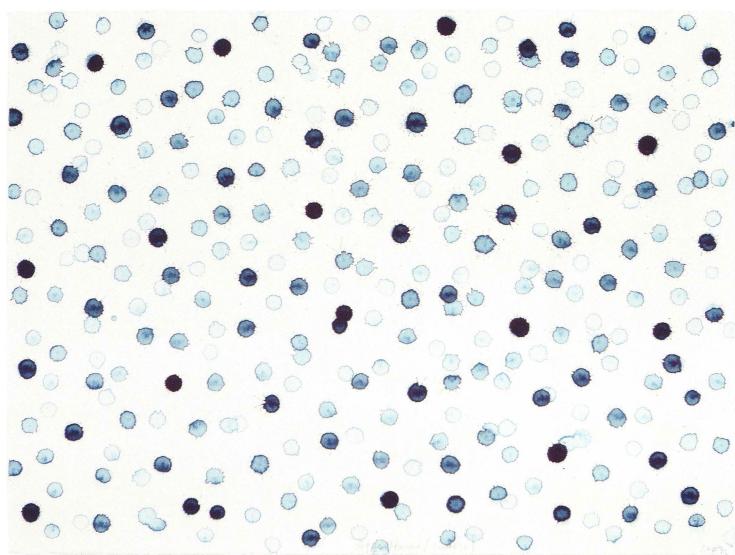


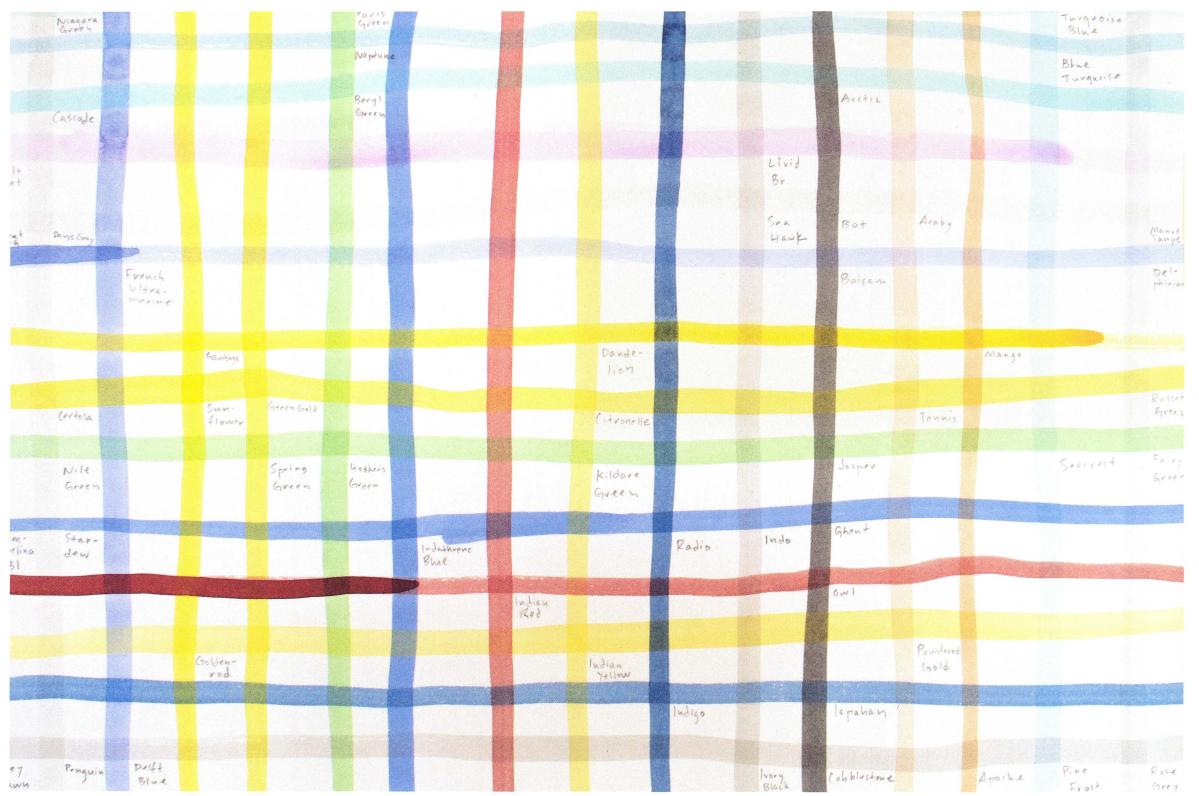
Spencer Finch, *Walden Pond (Morning Effect, March 13, 2007)*
(installation and detail), 2007



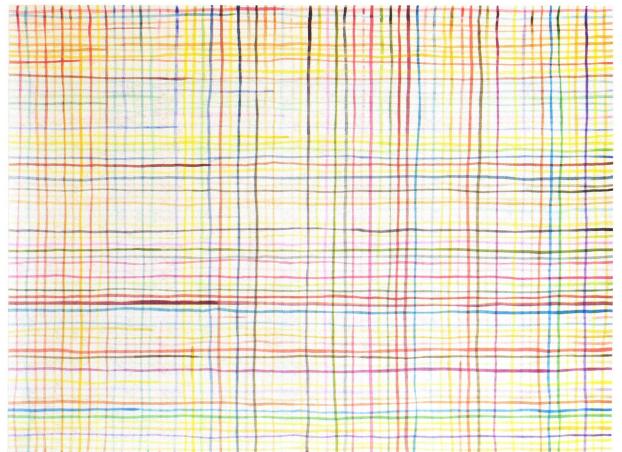


Spencer Finch, 8456 Shades of Blue (After Hume)
(Installation and detail), 2008

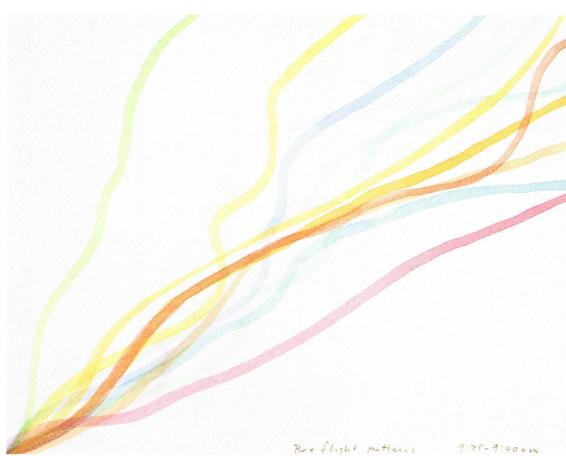




Spencer Finch, *The Garden of Eden (All Colors in My Paintbox)* (detail above), 2011



Spencer Finch, *Bee Flight Patterns*, 2011





View of painting rack, RISD Museum, 2011

Works in the Exhibition

In all dimensions, height precedes width precedes depth. For works on paper, dimensions represent sheet size unless otherwise noted. To protect sensitive works from exposure to light, some pieces will be rotated over the course of the exhibition, as indicated below.

The first part of the checklist consists of objects Finch selected from the Museum's collection. The section headings refer to groupings of works that reveal aesthetic connections among particular artists, unexpected relationships among disparate works, and the artist's sensibility. For example, "Tonalism" refers to works that depict darkness—the inverse of Impressionism, which focuses on light—whereas "1972" includes works either created in or close to that year, when a cacophony of different styles coexisted and when Finch remembers becoming visually aware. His choices also reflect the history and character of the Museum itself.

Claude Monet, French, 1840–1926
The Basin at Argenteuil (Le Bassin d'Argenteuil), 1874
 Oil on canvas, 21 3/4 x 29 1/4 in.
 Gift of Mrs. Murray S. Danforth 42.219

Painting Storage Rack

Artist unknown, American
Portrait of a Young Girl, ca. 1920
 Oil on canvas, 32 x 25 5/8 in.
 Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.402

Thomas Robinson, American,
 1835–1888
Spitz Dog, 1873
 Oil on canvas, 17 3/8 x 15 1/4 in.
 Gift of Mrs. Isaac Feno-Gendrot 18.510

Artist unknown, American
Portrait of Ezekial Burr, ca. 1830
 Oil on canvas, 29 7/8 x 24 15/16 in.
 Gift of Misses H. A. and E. L. Rea
 24.489

Artist unknown, American
Portrait of Mrs. Lydia Yates Burr, ca. 1830
 Oil on canvas, 30 x 28 7/8 in.
 Gift of Misses H. A. and E. L. Rea
 24.490

John Robinson Frazier, American,
 1889–1966
Portrait of Margaret Whitten, ca. 1927
 Oil on canvas, 36 1/4 x 30 1/8 in.
 Walter H. Kimball Fund 27.201

Thomas Young, American, 1765–1821
Portrait of Michael George C. Bates,
 ca. 1800
 Oil on canvas, 27 1/2 x 22 1/8 x 3/4 in.
 Jesse Metcalf Fund 33.045

Artist unknown, American
Portrait of a Man, ca. 1750
 Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 1/8 in.
 Museum Collection 43.4

James Sullivan Lincoln, American,
 1811–1888
George Remington, 1828
 Oil on canvas, 27 13/16 x 23 3/4 in.
 Gift of the Estate of Charles A.
 and Florence S. Place 44.061

Sargent and Schiele Watercolors

John Singer Sargent, American,
 1856–1925
Rocky Coast near Boston, 1921
 Watercolor and graphite on paper,
 13 13/16 x 21 1/16 in.
 Anonymous gift 1992.001.119

John Singer Sargent, American,
 1856–1925
Tomb, Toledo, 1903
 Watercolor and graphite on paper,
 14 3/4 x 10 in.
 Anonymous gift 1992.001.120

John Singer Sargent, American,
 1856–1925
Simplon, 1909–1911
 Watercolor on paper, 12 x 18 in.
 Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 22.086

Egon Schiele, Austrian, 1890–1918
The Weitenegg Ruins, 1916
 Charcoal on paper, 11 11/16 x 18 1/16 in.
 Anonymous gift 1990.141.4

Egon Schiele, Austrian, 1890–1918
Mountain Landscape, 1917
 Crayon on paper, 11 1/2 x 16 3/8 in.
 Anonymous gift 1989.109.1

Egon Schiele, Austrian, 1890–1918
Portrait of Marga Boerner, 1917
 Gouache and crayon on paper,
 17 15/16 x 11 5/8 in.
 Anonymous gift 1991.079

{Rotate with}

Egon Schiele, Austrian, 1890–1918
Portrait of a Woman, 1917
 Gouache and crayon on paper,
 18 1/8 x 11 5/8 in.
 Anonymous gift 1989.109.2

Tonalism

Attributed to Ralph Albert Blakelock,
 American, 1847–1919
Gathering Storm, late 19th–early
 20th century
 Oil on panel, 8 1/4 x 12 1/8 in.
 Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.283

Julia Margaret Cameron, English,
 1815–1879
*The Astronomer (John Frederick
 William Herschel)*, 1867
 Albumen print, 13 3/4 x 10 7/16 in.
 Museum purchase: bequest of Lyra
 Brown Nickerson, by exchange 82.008

{Rotate with}

Julia Margaret Cameron, English,
 1815–1879
*Untitled (Louise Beatrice
 de Fonblanche)*, 1868
 Albumen print, 13 x 10 3/8 in.
 Gift of Norman Bolotow and Tamara
 Belovitch and their Friends in honor
 of their marriage 82.063



Attributed to Ralph Albert Blakelock, *Gathering Storm*, late 19th–early 20th century. Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke

Andre Derain, French, 1880–1954
Nude in Landscape, ca. 1945
Ink and wash on paper, 10 5/8 x 10 7/8 in.
Gift of the Fazzano Brothers 84.198.1179

Joseph Gray, British, 1890–1962
Untitled, ca. 1925
Drypoint, 10 7/8 x 15 1/4 in.
Bequest of Dr. Charles H. MacDonald 60.085.79

Kobayashi Kiyochika, Japanese, 1847–1915
Our Field Artillery Attacks the Enemy Camp at Jiuliancheng, 1894
Polychrome woodblock print (triptych), 13 1/2 x 28 in. (overall)
Gift of Roger S. Keyes and Elizabeth Coombs 1998.72.4

{Rotate with}
Kobayashi Kiyochika, Japanese, 1847–1915
Our Army Attacks the Chinese Encampment at Pyongyang, 1894
Polychrome woodblock print (triptych), 13 11/16 x 27 1/4 in. (overall)
Gift of Roger S. Keyes and Elizabeth Coombs 1997.90.6

Bruce Nauman, American, b. 1941
Flesh to White to Black to Flesh, 1967–1968
Video, black and white, sound; 50:58 min.

Jesse Metcalf Fund 81.091

In the style of Albert Pinkham Ryder, American, 1847–1917
Maritime, n.d.
Oil on canvas, 8 x 12 in.
Museum Collection INV2005.49

Robert Ryman, American, b. 1930
Untitled, from the portfolio *Seven Aquatints*, 1972
2 color aquatints, ea. 23 13/16 x 23 15/16 in.
Museum purchase with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts 73.119

Georges Seurat, French, 1859–1891
Un singe (Monkey), 1884–1885
Contée crayon on paper, 5 3/8 x 9 7/16 in.
Collection of Douglas Sharpe

{Rotate with}
Georges Seurat, French, 1859–1891
La Grenouillère, ca. 1885

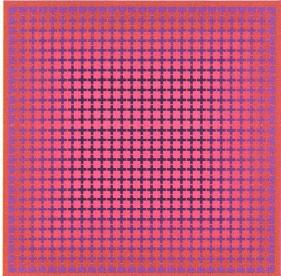
Contée crayon on paper, 9 3/8 x 12 1/4 in.

Gift of Mrs. Murray S. Danforth 42.209

Joseph Stella, American, 1877–1946
Underpass, Allegheny, 1908
Charcoal on paper, 11 3/16 x 16 5/16 in.
Anonymous gift 1992.001.129

James Abbott McNeill Whistler, American, 1834–1903
Harmony in Blue: The Duet, ca. 1874
Oil on panel, 10 3/4 x 18 in.

Jesse Metcalf Fund 14.083



Gene Davis, American, 1920–1985
Popsicle, 1969
Acrylic on canvas, 66 1/4 x 67 3/4 in.
Gift of Mr. Arthur J. Levy 72.173

Richard Estes, American, b. 1932
Grant's, 1972
From the portfolio *Urban Landscapes I*
Color screenprint, 19 5/8 x 27 5/16 in.
Museum purchase with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts 73.002.8

Adolph Gottlieb, American, 1903–1974
Pink Ground, 1972
Color screenprint, 36 1/8 x 27 1/2 in.
Gift of Mr. Wolf Kahn and Mrs. Emily Mason 79.162.5

Philip Guston, American, b. Canada, 1913–1980
The Road, 1972
Oil on canvas, 51 1/4 x 118 3/4 in.
Gift of the Estate of Musa Guston 1992.059.2

Julian Stanczak, American, b. Poland, 1928
Vaulted, 1983
Acrylic on canvas, 56 3/16 x 56 3/16 in.
Gift of Susan Werner and Thomas Lyon Mills 2003.55

Howard Hodgkin, English, b. 1932
Moonlight, 1972
Oil on wood, 26 3/8 x 30 1/2 in.
Bequest of Richard Brown Baker 2009.92.38

Victor Vasarely, French, b. Hungary, 1906–1997
Koeb IV, 1970
Color screenprint on lightweight paper board, 34 7/8 x 25 3/8 in.
Bequest of Richard Brown Baker 2009.92.230

Joan Mitchell, American, 1926–1992

Mooring, 1971

Oil on canvas, 95 x 71 in.

Harriet K. Ewing Collection 1992.124

Gerhard Richter, German, b. 1932
Ship (Schiff), 1972
Color photo-offset lithograph, 19 3/4 x 25 5/8 in.
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 2003.44

Edward Ruscha, American, b. 1937
Serious Injury, 1972
Gunpowder on paper, 11 1/16 x 29 1/8 in.
Museum purchase: Gift of the Museum Associates 75.063

Robert Ryman, American, b. 1930
Untitled from the portfolio *Seven Aquatints*, 1972

Color aquatint, 23 13/16 x 23 15/16 in.

Museum purchase with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts 73.119

Andy Warhol, American, 1930–1987
Mao Tse-Tung, 1972
Color screenprint, 35 7/8 x 35 7/8 in.
Twentieth Century Graphics Fund 73.023

Gary Winogrand, American, 1928–1984
New York City, 1971
Gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 in.
Gift of Frederick J. Myerson 82.303.8



Chinese, Jar with lid, ca. 206 BCE–CE 220.
Museum Appropriation Fund

Clouds and Moons

Chinese, Han Dynasty
Jar with lid, ca. 206 BCE–220 CE
Lead-glazed earthenware,
10 x 7 3/4 x 7 3/4 in.
Museum Appropriation Fund 18.572

John Constable, British, 1776–1837
Landscape Study, ca. 1830
Watercolor and graphite on paper,
3 5/8 x 4 3/4 in.
Anonymous gift 74.107.9
{Rotate with}
William Leighton Leitch, British,
1804–1883
Cloud Study-Ramsgate, Kent, mid-19th century
Watercolor on paper, 5 5/16 x 13 15/16 in.
Anonymous gift 1986.184.35

William Roxby Beverley, British,
ca. 1811–1889
Storm Clouds, mid-19th century
Watercolor, pen and ink, gouache,
5 5/16 x 8 5/8 in.
Anonymous gift 1986.184.5
{Rotate with}

Francis Seymour Haden, British,
1818–1910
Cloud Study, mid-19th century
Chalk on wove paper, 7 1/8 x 10 9/16 in.
Anonymous gift 2005.142.91

ILC Dover, manufacturer
Delaware, established 1947
Eleven layers of material for Extravehicular Mobility Unit (textile sample), ca. 1983
Nylon, acetate, spandex, Dacron, aluminized Mylar, polyurethane, neoprene, Ortho-Fabric (blend of Gore-Tex [Teflon], Nomex, and Kevlar); tricot knit, plain weave, coated, 20 x 12 in.
Gift of ILC Industries, Inc./ILC Dover 1990.034

Oscar Bluemner, American,
b. Germany, 1867–1938
Rosy Light, 1927
From the series *Suns and Moons*
Watercolor on paper, 9 1/2 x 13 in.
Anonymous gift 1992.001.23
{Rotate with}
James Rosenquist, American, b. 1933
Earth and Moon, 1971
From the *Cold Light Suite*
Color lithograph with Plexiglas and styrene beads,
19 3/4 x 18 1/8 x 1 1/2 in. framed
Gift of the Bayard and Harriet K. Ewing Collection 76.069



Gene Davis, *Popsicle*, 1969.
Gift of Mr. Arthur J. Levy

Pairs

Willem de Kooning, American, b. Netherlands, 1904–1997
Black and White Abstraction, ca. 1950
Saponin enamel on chart paper, 21 x 30 in.
Museum Works of Art Fund 56.186
 {Rotate with}

David Smith, American, 1906–1965
Untitled, 1960
Black egg ink and oil paint on paper 25 15/16 x 39 15/16 in.
Mary B. Jackson Fund 78.049

Peruvian, Chancay culture
Textile (head covering), Late Intermediate Period/
Late Horizon, 1200–1550
Undyed cotton (natural blue, brown, and off-white); overspun yarn, paired knotted-weft wrapping, 26 x 29 in.
Gift of the Weavers Guild of Boston 80.094.7

James Sullivan Lincoln, American, 1811–1888
Cyrus and Frank Taft, ca. 1860
Oil on canvas, 46 1/4 x 34 1/8 in.
Gift of Miss Amy H. Taft 12.158

Henriette Ronner, Dutch, 1821–1909
Infatigables, ca. 1895
Oil on panel, 9 5/8 x 12 13/16 in.
Gift of Miss Maria L. Corliss 29.109



Carlo Scarpa, Murano glass plate, ca. 1950. Gift of Glenn Gissler

Anne Klein and Co., design house New York, established 1965
Donna Karan, head designer, 1974–1984, American, b. 1948
Boot tights, early 1980s
Viscose, nylon, elastic, leather, warp knit, pile, 38 1/2 x 9 1/2 x 3 1/8, shoe height: 5 1/2 in.
Gift of the Estate of Peggy Cone 2001.73.83

Carlo Scarpa, Italian, 1906–1978
Murano glass plate, ca. 1950
Glass, 14 1/4 in. diam.
Gift of Glenn Gissler 2009.106.8

Odds and Ends

Japanese
Textile swatches, 20th century
Gift of Andrea Aranow 2009.117

Sherrie Levine, American, b. 1947
Check #5, 1986
Casein, wax, mahogany, 24 x 19 5/8 in.
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 2002.9



Anne Klein and Co., design house, Donna Karan, head designer, Boot tights, early 1980s. Gift of the Estate of Peggy Cone

Works by Spencer Finch

Copy of Monet's *Basin at Argenteuil*, 1988
Oil on canvas, 22 x 28 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Bee Purple, 2008/2012
Fluorescent lights, filters, astroturf, foamcore, acrylic paint, 9 ft. 10 in. x 13 ft. 6 in. x 12 ft.
Courtesy of Galerie Nordenhake, Berlin/Stockholm

Bee Flight Patterns, 2011
7 watercolors on paper, ea. 8 1/2 x 11 in.
Courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

Sky (Over Franz Joseph Glacier, April 8, 2008, 10:40am), 2008
Ice, dye, water, freezer, mixed media, dimensions variable
(pool approx. 7 ft. x 7 ft.)
Courtesy of Yvon Lambert, Paris

Taxonomy of Clouds, 2006
17 archival inkjet photographs, ea. 6 x 6 in.
Courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

Walden Pond (Morning Effect, March 13, 2007), 2007
Paper collage, 50 x 138 in.
Courtesy of Lisson Gallery, London

8456 Shades of Blue (After Hume), 2008
28 watercolors on paper, ea. 22 x 30 in., approx. 154 x 210 in. (overall)
Courtesy of Galerie Nordenhake, Berlin/Stockholm

Nine Melting Snowflakes, Dec. 31, 2008
Snowflakes on paper, 22 x 30 in.
Courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

Particle of Dust Floating in a Shaft of Sunlight (down), NZ, 3/23/08, 6:25pm, 2008
Colored pencil on paper, 19 1/2 x 27 in.
Courtesy of Lisson Gallery, London

Particle of Dust Floating in a Shaft of Sunlight (down), NZ, 3/23/08, 6:31pm, 2008
Colored pencil on paper, 19 1/2 x 27 in.
Courtesy of Lisson Gallery, London

Pacific Ocean, Stinson Beach, California, November 10, 2004 (noon effect), 2009
Watercolor on paper, 26 x 39 1/8 in.
Courtesy of Galerie Nordenhake, Berlin/Stockholm

Pacific Ocean, Noosa, Australia, April 1, 2008 (afternoon effect), 2009
Watercolor on paper, 26 x 39 in.
Courtesy of Galerie Nordenhake, Berlin/Stockholm

Thank You, Fog, 2009
60 archival inkjet photographs, ea. 4 3/4 x 4 3/4 in.
Courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

Fox Glacier XII, 2010
Watercolor on paper, 21 x 29 1/2 in.
Courtesy of Yvon Lambert, Paris

Fox Glacier XIII, 2010
Watercolor on paper, 21 x 29 in.
Courtesy of Yvon Lambert, Paris

Fox Glacier XV, 2010
Watercolor on paper, 29 x 40 1/2 in.
Courtesy of Yvon Lambert, Paris

The Garden of Eden (All Colors in My Paintbox), 2011
Watercolor and pencil on paper, 50 3/4 x 68 in.
Collection of Judy and Robbie Mann, Providence

Painting Air, 2012
Glass and acrylic wall painting, approx. 16 x 42 x 35 ft.
Courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago, and Lisson Gallery, London

Acknowledgments

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Photography by Erik Gould. Photography of Spencer Finch artwork, courtesy of the artist.
Cover photo: Luke Stettner. Photo p. 8, top left: Ruth Clark.

Cover: Spencer Finch, Study for *Painting Air* (detail), 2011

About the Artist

Spencer Finch was born in New Haven, CT, in 1962. He lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. Finch's work has been shown in solo and group exhibitions in galleries and museums around the world—most recently at the Art Institute of Chicago (2011); Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego (2011); the Folkestone Triennial, UK (2011); and Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (2010)—as well as in Rome, Paris, Berlin, Groningen, the Netherlands, and Brisbane, Australia, among other cities. His work was featured in the 2009 Venice Biennale; the 2004 Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, NY; and in a 2007 retrospective at Mass MoCA, North Adams, MA.

Finch's work is in many distinguished collections, including those of the High Museum of Art, Atlanta; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main, Germany; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, NY; and Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT. He received a degree in comparative literature from Hamilton College and an MFA in sculpture from the Rhode Island School of Design.